

THE PAINTER IDENTITY ANXIETY

Zhao Mengsha

ZHAO GANG joined the hutong dwelling impressionists the “Stars Group” when he was only sixteen years old. He went on to win a scholarship to study abroad in 1983, and soon integrated seamlessly into the Western gallery system. Having held his own in a “white man’s game,” Zhao is without a doubt among the elite of practicing artists of his generation. But this “elite” status is precisely what Zhao has always avoided, and what makes him feel most conflicted. While other Chinese artists were stepping onto the world stage by way of “China’s New Art, Post-1989,” Zhao was purposely becoming an “amateur” artist. In the 1990s he worked in an investment bank on Wall Street for seven years. Next he was an art dealer, and later he took over as publisher for Art Asia Pacific. Only after all of this did he return to his calling as a painter. His professional trajectory aside, Zhao Gang the man has a distinct and contradictory personality, almost in the classic way we would imagine for a painter. He is rebellious, sensitive, frenetic, and mischievous. He speeds down the road on his motorcycle, and is seen as “Beijing’s Baudelaire” by many of his Western friends. He even has the nickname “Gangsta Zhao.” His work has received varied assessments from a range of critics and curators, with his paintings at turns sweepingly labeled as “Absurdist,” “Expressionist,” and “Bad Painting.”

It is precisely this melding of identities and richness of life experience that form Zhao Gang’s self-awareness, the singularity of his artistic position and the extremely personalized language of his expression. In 1993, Zhao copied the ID photos of a group of illegal immigrants and named the work *Spy Portrait*. Under each nameless face, he wrote a portion of an autobiographical statement: “winter of ’89. I had to visit China. Maybe I will stay there.”; “When the Maastricht newspaper printed my photograph, I was already in Holland studying art. In the night I kept thinking about home...” These words—an intermingling of nostalgia and private memories—are deliberately incomplete, leaving it to the viewer’s imagination to stitch together the rest and forming a story that is part real, part fiction. The end result is a return to the image of the Chinese artist living in a foreign land. Having strangers for compatriots inspired Zhao’s reflections on identity politics, and he responded to anxiety over his own identity through the presence of the other.

When Zhao Gang returned back into the scope of the Chinese contemporary art world, the entire market was still immersed in a coal descent post-Olympics come down, having been consumed by the fever of the Games before and during. Up until then, Zhao had been absent not only from contemporary art’s “China fever,” but also from Chinese society’s transformation as a whole. When he returned home in 2004, though his practice attempted to formulate a response to the intense changes that were happening in the outside world, it did not add to a direct discussion of China’s problems. In many of his works, like *A Twist of Fate*, *The Great War and Scene*, the images he chose for material

came mostly from China of the 1960s and 70s—model operas of the Cultural Revolution, members of the Mao family, battle fields and war lords—all of it obviously lagging behind the Political Pop of the 1990s. Zhao Gang embodied the traumas of an era's vicissitudes through a kind of modernist reflection, deflating nationalist sentiment and internalizing it as a form of violent aggression. In doing this he tried to fix contemporary China as he understood it. It was an almost indescribable reality, brimming with the artist's Romantic imagination: he rode his horse in search of giants, but his was an age without giants, only windmills. Zhao Gang thus became the "sacrificial lamb" of his times; having left China for over 20 years, his lack of experience with the place made him unable to comment on its contemporary phenomena. The gift of his late home coming has been that while his peers go on acting as spokes people for the zeitgeist of the times or vanguards of national identity, he has been able to escape history's kidnapping. Zhao's international identity exempts him from these shackles on expression, granting his choice of subject matter a higher degree of freedom and flexibility.

In "Another Reality," his 2013 solo exhibition at Lin & Lin Gallery in Taipei, Zhao Gang "fabricates" a "Royal Art Collection." Tampering with foundations of traditional Chinese composition and imagery, he produces the incongruity of collage. For instance, on top of a copy of Han Gan's renowned painting Two Horses and a Groom, with a Buddha rendered in flat brush strokes and a background painted as if the Tang artist himself had done it, Zhao Gang writes the words "The Hero Never Returned." He uses this new image to dispel the work's original context and respond to the Taiwanese gallery's emphasis on classical story and technique. A similar train of thought can be found even earlier, in Zhao's 2011 exhibition "Burning the Wood: Collection of Du Yuesheng" at Aye Gallery. Here, the artist switches places with the historical figure himself, and painting titles like Soft Kill and Roundabout Victory are reminiscent of the narrative relationship between illustrations in a chapterbook, deconstructing the lifetime of Du the modern hero. Whether "Du Yuesheng" or the "Imperial Family," all of these historical characters are endowed by the artist with political identity, as reference to the cultural patterns they reflect. It is Zhao's study of the flavor of the times as refracted by art, and of the formation of art's built-in value system.

Zhao Gang aims to look at classical painting and even the problems of history through a modern person's eyes, discussing the anxiety of the present environment in terms of its greater historical context. In this way "The Khitans," Zhao Gang's 2013 solo exhibition at Platform China, can be seen as a new starting point for his more recent body of work. "The Khitans," an extinct people from ancient Chinese history, are an example of a group marked both by conflict and by harmony (they first invaded and then were assimilated). The referentiality of the subject matter is ambiguous, making it that much more inclusive of possible themes. The exhibition follows anthropological inclinations, choosing to focus on images of figures from different phases of history such as the Khitans, the women of the Tang, and the horse men of Goguryeo. On top of this, Zhao Gang copies Ming artist Qiu Ying's landscapes, and even makes a mold of the artist's face. Regarding the ending of this murky narrative, there is no set conclusion as to whether the three unidentifiable wild horsemen are returning from or

setting out on their crusade. Zhao Gang gives his audience clues about a certain kind of doubt, hinting at the idea that invasion and assimilation are, though in opposition to each other, consecutive historical inevitabilities. It is an idea corresponding to the state of the world as conceived by post-Cold War thought, in which conflict is similarly a part of history and an antithetical relationship between a nation and a race becomes a genuinely false proposition.

Zhao Gang chooses the Song as his entry point into ancient subject matter, repeatedly painting the figure of Emperor Huizong and turning him into a vehicle for meaningful images extending from one end of the exhibition to the other. He makes a careful effort to maintain a safe distance from history, closely examining from the perspective of a bystander the link between a people buried by history and a nation as it exists today. In doing so he affirms the reflection upon modernity inherent to his paintings. The Song was an era in Chinese history filled with both cultural and political strife; it carried on the flourishing civilization of the Tang, and yet fell in its brush with the culture of the Empire of the Steppes. The autocracy of imperial authority and the political participation of the literati was the start of the rigid Cheng Zhu School of Neo-Confucianism. In portraying the rich symbolism contained in this time period, Zhao finds a completely new space for self-expression.

The extreme individuality of Zhao Gang's painterly expression takes its inspiration from somewhere unique. When dealing with concrete images, the artist imbues his process with an understanding of abstract painting. Abstraction has become a rhetorical means for him to achieve certain states of visual communication. Its deployment and its relationship to the underlying elements that guide his work may be rooted in Zhao's experience with abstract painting during his New York days. At the same time, on a formal level, Zhao will always consider how to establish an effective linkage with traditional Chinese painting, first building a surface layer and arranging composition with this in mind. He is skilled at switching between Eastern and Western viewpoints; for him painting becomes a natural translational medium.

Painting is a process of wrestling with two dimensions. Zhao Gang emphasizes the physicality of the work, allowing motional instinct to govern the painting surface. Free and easy brushstrokes restrain each element around a point of equilibrium in an effort towards a sort of complicated perfection. Sometimes he gets out of hand, like an impulsive, irascible, middle-aged soul whose art gives free play to his destructive powers. For Zhao Gang, painting is his Sisyphean boulder, compelling him to ceaselessly push to the edges of his craft and smash any would-be stability along the way. It is precisely this lack of stability that makes him difficult to sort out or define, but the value of his individual practice—of his complex brand of uniqueness and his grapple with identity — will fully come to light when this discourse on “the times” finally come to an end.